

In the Mirror of the Other

Imprints of Muslim–Christian Encounters in the Late Antique and Early Medieval Mediterranean

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The history of premodern Islamic art and architecture is highlighted by such world-renowned monuments as the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Alhambra Palace in Granada, the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, the Tomb of Sheikh Šafi al-Dīn in Ardabil, Iran, and the Mosque of al-Ḥākim in Cairo. In design and decoration, these edifices convey the cultural, political, social, intellectual, and sectarian affiliations and aspirations of their commissioners, makers, and users, who hail from diverse backgrounds. Since the late nineteenth century, the strata of meaning embodied in these buildings have been explored in numerous publications, and over the past two decades high-quality photographs of them have become increasingly available online. Despite such unabating interest in these structures, however, one of the most significant elements they share, *muthannā* (mirror writing; henceforth muthanna), remains unexplored.¹

Current scholarship erroneously dates muthanna to a period between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries (all dates herein are CE) and identifies Iran as its place of origin. Furthermore, scholars often champion muthanna as an exclusively Islamic art form, unaware of mirror compositions made by, e.g., Coptic or Byzantine Christians in Arabic, Greek, or Latin. This partial

view has led many to endow the Muslim calligrapher with sole agency in the creation of mirror writing. This misjudgment, moreover, has unwittingly placed the Muslim artist's activities within a cultural and intellectual abyss, in which he appears uninformed of both his predecessors' and his contemporaries' wide-ranging experiments with textual design.

With the dual goal of addressing such mischaracterizations of muthanna and situating discussions of it in the global history of writing and calligraphic design, this article investigates the art form beyond the unitary and isolated Islamic framework into which mirror compositions have been relegated. Shifting to a broader and more fluid artistic terrain, I begin with a consideration of mirror writing in relation to similarly altered writing forms—specifically, reversed, repeated, and unidirectionally symmetrical inscriptions—that predate muthanna's oldest known examples. Identifying the parallels between these writing forms, I demonstrate that muthanna's structural principles were employed in non-Arabic-script designs several decades before the art of Islamic calligraphy had reached maturity. This new understanding reveals, in turn, that the calligraphic form celebrated by scholars and artists as a “pure” trademark of Islamic art has a history that is older and richer than previously recognized. Furthermore, an analysis of textiles featuring mirror writing in Greek and Arabic, which are attributed to workshops in Syro-Palestine, Egypt, and Constantinople, concludes that mirror compositions made their debut between the seventh

1 For detailed discussions of mirror inscriptions found on these monuments, see E. Akin-Kivanç, *Muthanna / Mirror Writing in Islamic Calligraphy: History, Theory, and Aesthetics* (Bloomington, IN, 2020).

and ninth centuries—three to five hundred years earlier than modern scholarship has maintained. This finding places mirror writing at a time when Byzantine and Arab forces were negotiating their territories and shaping their visual identities in the polyglot world of the Eastern Mediterranean. Accordingly, the concurrent appearance of mirror inscriptions in locales outside of Iran (purported to be muthanna's place of origin), where Copts, Byzantines, and Muslims coexisted, directly challenges the prevalent belief that muthanna was created in a single moment by a single individual (presumably a Muslim artist). Contrary to this widespread belief, this study proposes that mirror writing was formed and transformed within the interstices of these communities as the collective product of non-Muslim and Muslim artists' centuries-old practices with the aesthetics of writing orientations.

The significance of this new history of muthanna is threefold. First, it moves scholarship on mirror writing out of its stagnant and monochromatic hermeneutic space and into the dynamic and kaleidoscopic world of late antiquity. It is here, within this new frame of reference, that mirror compositions shed further light on the cosmopolitan landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean and its networks of people, ideas, and goods. Second, a new definition of mirror writing as a vivid expression of a late antique koine brings to the fore the underrecognized multilingual and multid doctrinal literacy of the period's artists and audiences. This endeavor to emphasize convergences—rather than divergences—in artistic and quotidian practices thus responds to scholars' welcome, if belated, invitations to include Islam within studies of the late antique and early medieval Mediterranean.² Finally, when added to a global history of art, muthanna can catalyze more inclusive and textured narratives. It can traverse the artificial chasm of modern scholarship that divides the religions, cultures, languages, and arts of the Eastern Mediterranean, all without forgoing its own value as a prime example of Islamic calligraphy.

2 In "New Themes and Styles Revisited Again: Literature, Theology and Social and Political Change," Averil Cameron summarizes the state of scholarship on the art and architecture of the Eastern Mediterranean, and emphasizes the need to include Islam in scholarly investigations as the focus of research on late antiquity moves eastward. See her chapter in *New Themes, New Styles in the Eastern Mediterranean: Christian, Jewish, and Islamic Encounters, 5th–8th Centuries*, ed. H. Amirav and F. Celia (Leuven, 2017), 1–18.

Before Mirror Compositions

The oldest known reference to the concept of "beautiful writing" in Islamic history is found in accounts of early Muslims' deliberations of who should be charged with the important task of penning multiple copies of the Quran, the holy book of Islam, during the reign of 'Uthmān (r. 644–656), the third caliph.³ The Quran had been communicated to the Prophet Muḥammad orally, and Muslims had preserved it largely in memory until the Prophet's death in 632. The search for a scribe with superior handwriting indicates a desire to write down God's word in an aesthetically pleasing form so that the eye, upon being stimulated by outward appearance, would alert the mind to engage with the meaning therein. By the ninth century, individual practices in beautiful writing had developed into a full-fledged, systematic art form known as *ḥusn al-khatṭ*.⁴ Since then, the Islamic art of calligraphy has been a highly revered aesthetic manifestation of "Muslimness," one that transcends racial, national, ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, geographical, and temporal boundaries.

Muthanna, commonly known as "mirror writing," is a popular form of *ḥusn al-khatṭ*. It is composed of a source text and its mirror reverse positioned face to face on a horizontal or vertical axis (fig. 1). A mirror composition utilizes three techniques: reversal of a source text, repetition of a source text in its mirror reverse, and bilateral symmetry. Because muthanna is

3 According to the narrative commonly accepted by scholars of Islam, individual verses of the Quran were recorded on bones and palm leaves during the life of the Prophet, but it was not until the time of Abū Bakr (r. 632–634), the first caliph, that the Quran was compiled and written down as a complete book. This copy was later entrusted to Hafṣa, daughter of 'Umar (r. 634–644), the second caliph. By the time of 'Uthmān, additional copies of the holy book were needed for the fast-growing *umma* (Muslim community), whose leading members then assembled a committee headed by Zayd ibn Thābit (d. bet. 662 and 676) to assign the task of penning copies to someone with exquisite handwriting. Even though Zayd ibn Thābit himself and 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib (Muḥammad's cousin and son-in-law) were both known for their beautiful handwriting, on 'Alī's recommendation Khālid ibn Abī al-Hayyāj, a friend of 'Alī's and scribe of the governor of Medina, was appointed for this historically significant project.

4 By the end of the seventh century, a more uniform Arabic script was developed for official correspondence. The principles of *ḥusn al-khatṭ* based on the module of a dot were established in the ninth century. For a history of the technical development of Islamic calligraphy, see S. S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh, 2006).

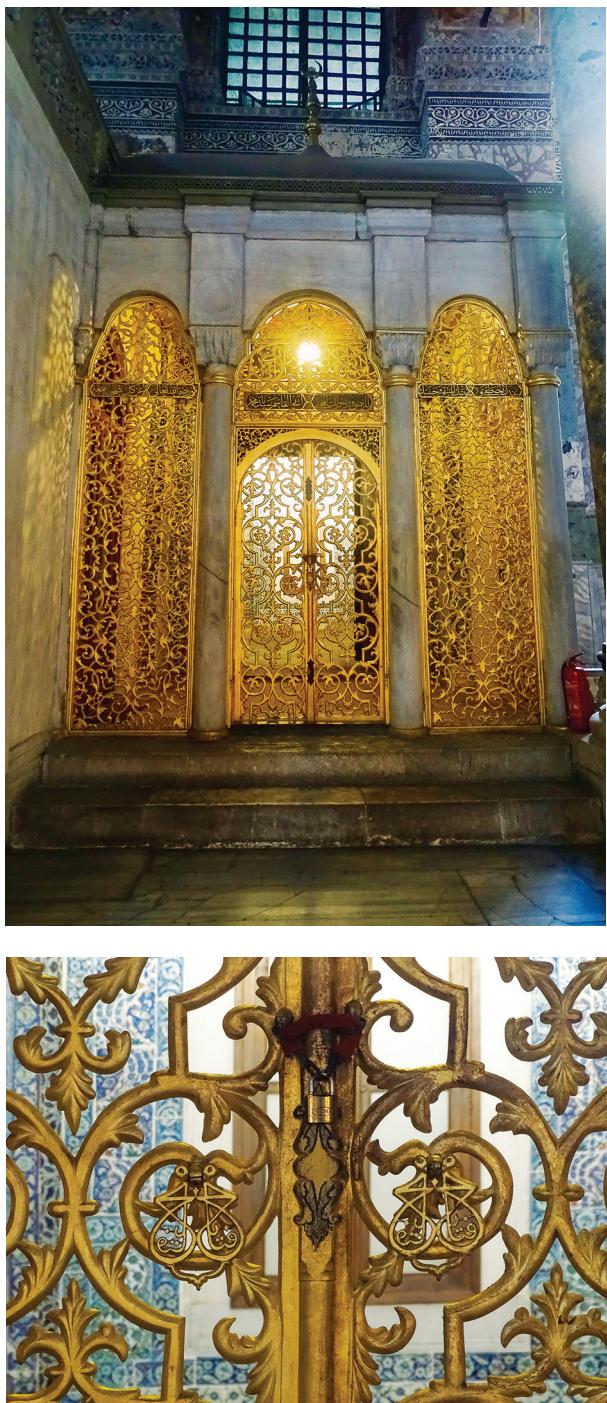


Fig. 1. Gilded doors with two knockers featuring a mirror composition with the phrase *Yā Fattāh* (O Opener!), one of the *asmā' al-ḥusnā* (beautiful names of God); detail. Library of Sultan Mahmud I (completed 1740), Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey. Photo by author.

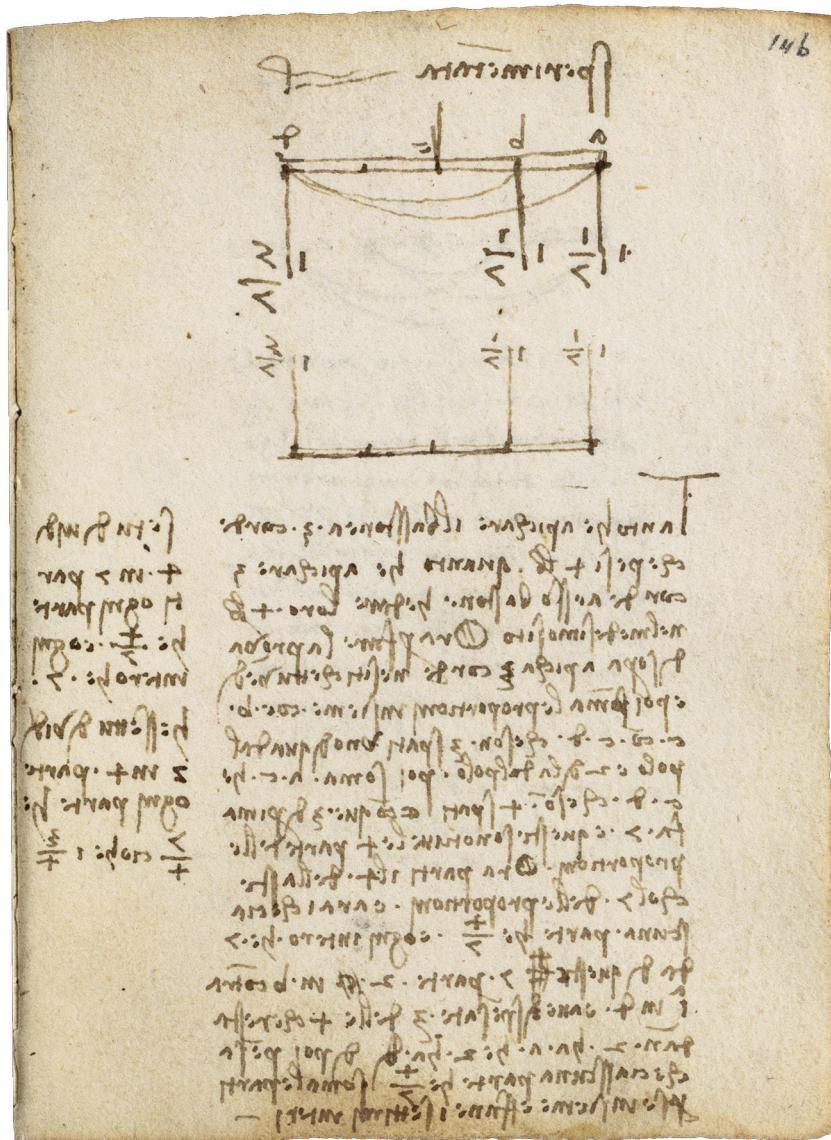
a compositional arrangement and comprises two units, it is distinguished from unidirectionally inverted texts, as seen, for instance, in Leonardo da Vinci's reversed handwriting (fig. 2). Although a mirror composition can be created using a single letter, designs that incorporate multiple letters and words are more typical. In Islamic art, muthanna texts are almost always inscribed in Arabic; there exists only a handful of examples rendered in Persian and Ottoman Turkish. Mirror compositions can be created using any script, as can be attested by a limited number of surviving artworks in Greek and Latin. Historically, in Islamic contexts texts configured in muthanna have consisted of overwhelmingly pious expressions, such as quranic phrases, the names of God and holy persons, apotropaic expressions seeking divine protection and blessings, and references to death and resurrection. With the exception of works on architectural monuments, it is not unusual for mirror compositions to accompany depictions of human figures, as well as both real and fantastical creatures. Such a pairing can be observed, for instance, on an early twelfth-century Almoravid shroud found in the tomb of San Pedro de Osma (d. 1109), bishop of Burgo de Osma, which displays a rare example of a mirror design incorporating an alleged provenance juxtaposed with bilaterally symmetrical figures of lions and harpies (fig. 3).⁵ It appears that geometrically correct mirror compositions made their appearance first on textiles, and beginning from the eleventh century, architectural surfaces became the preferred medium for muthanna. Mirror compositions have also been widely featured on paper, ceramic, metal, marble, and wood.

Misconceptions about mirror writing abound in modern scholarship, which is sparse and largely speculative, and no primary source that engages with the history or meaning of muthanna appears to exist.⁶ This

⁵ The inscription reads, "This was made in the town of Baghdad, may God guard it." The technical features of the fabric have allowed specialists to invalidate Baghdad as the provenance, and attribute the piece to Andalusia instead. Scholars suggest that the inscription's mention of Baghdad indicates the maker's desire to benefit from Baghdad's fame for high-quality textile production. For more on this celebrated cloth, see L. W. Mackie, *Symbols of Power: Luxury Textiles from Islamic Lands, 7th–21st Century* (Cleveland, OH, 2015), 180–82.

⁶ Until recently the most comprehensive study on the topic was A. Tüfekçioğlu, "Symmetrical Compositions in Pre-Ottoman and

Fig. 2.
Page from Codex Forster II,
showing Leonardo da
Vinci's reverse handwriting.
Ca. 1495–97. London,
Victoria and Albert
Museum MSL/1876/
Forster/141/II. Photo
courtesy the Victoria and
Albert Museum.



Ottoman Architectural Inscriptions in Asia Minor," in *Calligraphy and Architecture in the Muslim World*, ed. M. Gharipour and I. C. Schick (Edinburgh, 2013), 447–62. In a brief but perceptive essay, Moshalleh al-Moraekhi suggested a connection between reverse inscriptions and mirror writing. See his "A New Perspective on the Phenomenon of Mirror-Image Writing in Arabic Calligraphy," in *Studies on Arabia in Honour of Professor G. Rex Smith*, ed. J. F. Healey and V. Porter (Oxford, 2002), 123–33. Other studies on muthanna consist of inadequate or inaccurate interpretations. These studies include S. Ünver, *Türk yazı çeşitleri: Türk hattatları yazılarından örneklerle birlikte ba'zi faideli izahat verilmiştir* (İstanbul, 1953), 21; A. Soysal, *Hüsniyat* (İstanbul, 2004), 54; İ. H. Baltacıoğlu, *Türklerde yazı sanatı: Türk sanat yazılarının grafolojisi ve estetiği üzerine sosyo-psikolojik deneme* (Ankara, 1958); and C. Avcı, "Türk sanatında aynalı yazılar," *Kültür ve Sanat* 5 (1977): 20–33.

lack of comprehensive or reliable literature on the topic necessitates a study of muthanna in relation to other writing forms that predate it and display one or more of the three techniques used in its creation: reversal, repetition, and symmetry. To rebuild the fragmentary history of muthanna within a broader and more nuanced framework, and to draw attention to the hybrid cultural milieu of late antiquity wherein I locate the art form's early appearance, I organize the representational material in Greek, Coptic, Aramaic, and Arabic scripts in terms of the writing techniques employed, instead of adhering to a strict linguistic or chronological arrangement. My purpose in adopting this structure is to



Fig. 3.
Shroud of San Pedro de Osma, featuring mirror inscriptions juxtaposed with figures of lions attacking harpies. Spain, Almeria, first half of the twelfth century. Lampas and plain-weave variant: silk and gold thread, 50 × 43 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 33.371. Photo courtesy the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

highlight the fact that mirror writing's history bears no traces of a eureka moment in muthanna's creation. Rather, when examined as *longue durée*, the historical context of muthanna emerges as the paragon of a wide spectrum of practices with calligraphic design that preoccupied artists who lived and worked in the interconnected cultural and artistic centers of the Eastern Mediterranean. Imprints of this interconnectedness are found in designs featuring two different scripts.

Before introducing bilingual scripts modified through reversal, repetition, or symmetrical placement, it is helpful to first examine a work where two scripts have been placed side by side, albeit without concern for enhancing their aesthetic appeal through design. Currently in the collection of the Egyptian Textiles Museum in Cairo, these inscriptions are found on a woolen textile that exists in multiple roundels (fig. 4). Each roundel depicts a hunting scene, with a centrally placed figure of a male hunter mounted on his horse and two galloping animals—an antelope above the horse, and what appears to be a cheetah in the foreground—portrayed against a vivid,

dark red background. Although this is a familiar late antique iconography, popular especially on Persian and Byzantine textiles, it stands out among similar hunting scenes on account of the letters and words that are scattered among the figures.⁷ For example, the Greek letter *theta* (θ), the Arabic phrase *li-llāh* (to God), and the hijra year *sana mi'a* ("one hundred," 718 or 719) are visible on one fragment. The inscriptions' arbitrary positions and slanted orientations accelerate the scene's dynamism, but without an aesthetic dictate that would orchestrate their position within the otherwise nicely balanced composition, the free-floating letters and words appear as mere space fillers. Despite the letters' and words' haphazard placement and their arrangement without reversal or repetition, the coexistence of the Greek and Arabic scripts is striking because it

⁷ Textiles with similar hunting scenes are preserved in the collections of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, St. Servatius in Maastricht, the Louvre Museum, and Musée des Tissus, Lyon, among others.

Fig. 4.
Textile fragment.
Egypt, eighth
century. Wool.
Egyptian Textiles
Museum, Cairo,
MIA 12632.
Photo by author.



intimates a bilingual audience for the piece, and directs attention to similar juxtapositions, such as those found on oil lamps.

A corpus of oil lamps marked by bilingual inscriptions was excavated at three different sites in the Eastern Mediterranean (the cisterns of the Shrine of Bethphage in Jerusalem, a burial place at Gezer, and Khirbet Tekua near Bethlehem). Dated to the late seventh or early eighth century, these slipper-type lamps display identical decoration, suggesting that they came from the same mold. They bear a cross on their spout and feature these Greek words around their central opening: “The light of Christ, the Lord, shines for the servants of God,” which is a variation of the common expression, “The light of Christ shines for all.”⁸ Although their semantic content is by no means novel, inscriptions produced from this mold differ from others in that without disrupting the compositional layout they seamlessly incorporate into

the Greek expression the aforementioned phrase *li-llāh*, inscribed in Arabic script.

Since the word *Allāh* was used also by Arabic-speaking Christians to refer to God, the presence of this expression does not necessarily call for the composition’s consideration outside of a strictly Christian context. At the same time, *li-llāh* is an abbreviated form of the quranic concept *al-mulk li-llāh* (the dominion belongs to God, based on Q 22:56), also shortened as *al-mulk* (the dominion or sovereignty). The longer expression and its two abbreviated versions are inscribed in unidirectional, repeated, and mirror forms on countless monuments and portable objects with unquestionably Islamic provenance, at times accompanied by the name of the Prophet Muhammad or the *shahāda* (the Muslim profession of faith).⁹ When considered in relation to

⁸ Ps. 13:3, 119:105; Prov. 6:23, 20:20, 24:20; Job 18:5–6.

⁹ The concept is established in Q 22:56 with the words *al-mulku yawma idhin li-llāhi* (On that day the dominion will be that of God). It is discussed in detail in Q 67 (“The Dominion”), and

the phrase's Islamic uses and associations, the composition on these lamps appears to be a reflection of fluid religious boundaries, if not an overtly bidoctrinal statement. An Arabic phrase understood both by Christians and Muslims invites a visual and physical association between the two faiths and helps us to discern the previous contours of late antique linguistic and religious spaces that made possible the mobility of such everyday objects, as well as of their makers and users.¹⁰

As recently investigated historical records have revealed, the shared linguistic and religious spaces of the Eastern Mediterranean did not dissolve immediately after the advent of Islam, and there exists much visual material to corroborate the written sources.¹¹ One important piece of evidence speaking to this intercultural meeting can be found, once more, on an oil lamp currently housed in the Jordanian Archaeological Museum in Amman. Described as the "Jerash type" and loosely dated to the eighth century, the lamp is significant for the two fully developed texts in Greek and Arabic executed on its upper and lower surfaces. The Greek inscription on the lamp's right shoulder begins with a cross and ends with a bird, with a palm tree in between. It reads: "The light of Christ [is] the resurrection," another variant of the abovementioned biblical phrasing, which is repeated almost verbatim on the lamp's left shoulder. In an explicit show of bidoctrinal literacy, on its base the lamp features the phrase,

repeated in various forms in Q 2:107; 3:189; 5:40; 24:42; 45:27; 57:5; and 85:9, among others. The formula *al-mulk li-llāh* is frequently displayed on architectural surfaces and coins, as seen, for instance, on a star-shaped tile from Kashan, dated to ca. 1270 (Victoria and Albert Museum accession no. 560-1900), and two coins from the Maghreb and Seljuq Anatolia, dated to ca. 750–1650 and to bet. 1077 and 1307 respectively (the David Collection C 219 and C 547). F. B. Flood (*Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* [Princeton, 2009], 39) mentions Multani coins struck with the words *li-llāh Muḥammad*. For discussions of the phrase *li-llāh* on Islamic lusterware and seals, see R. Ettinghausen, "Notes on the Lusterware of Spain," *Ars Orientalis* 1 (1954): 133–56, at 145–47; and V. Porter, *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum* (London, 2011), 71. The concept of *al-mulk* is also one of the major themes of the calligraphic program at the Dome of the Rock.

10 For more on these lamps, see S. J. Saller and E. Testa, *The Archaeological Setting of the Shrine of Bethphage* (Jerusalem, 1961), 20–27, and B. Bagatti, *L'Église de la Circoncision*, tr. Albert Storme (Jerusalem, 1965), 204, fig. 87:4.

11 See, for instance, N. Khalek, *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam* (New York, 2011), 16.

bi-smi-llāh al-rahmān al-rahīm (in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate), written in an angular Arabic script, and in reverse.¹²

In the past, epigraphists and art historians have often discarded reversals of single letters, words, or phrases, writing them off as accidental or meaningless practices, even going as far as to consider them to be scribal artifice meant to tease the reader.¹³ However, as Henry Maguire has convincingly refuted, far from being inadvertent or pointless exercises, reverse texts in Greek were intended to function as apotropaic devices designed to invoke the aid of God or holy figures, and to block supernatural malice.¹⁴ Reverse inscriptions were imbued with similar functions in Samaritan and Islamic contexts as well, as attested by their ubiquitous presence on such quotidian items as talismanic objects and oil lamps.¹⁵ A group of late antique oil lamps examined by Eugenia L. Nitowski and Joseph Naveh, for instance, features inverted inscriptions that incorporate the Arabic words *Allāh* (God) and *baraka* (blessing). As the authors have suggested, this altered orientation intimates the protective powers consumers assigned to reverse writing: directed away from the mundane world, such inscriptions are addressed to a higher power beyond.¹⁶

Given the cosmopolitan nature of the markets for which the Jerash lamps were produced, it is difficult to conclude with certainty whether the reversal

12 The lamp is illustrated and discussed in N. I. Khairy and A.-J. A. 'Amr, "Early Inscribed Pottery Lamps from Jordan," *Levant* 18 (1986): 143–53, pl. 41:15.

13 See, for instance, M. C. A. Macdonald, "Nomads and the Hawrān in the Late Hellenistic and Roman Periods: A Reassessment of the Epigraphic Evidence," *Syria* 70.3/4 (1993): 303–403, 405–13.

14 H. Maguire, "Garments Pleasing to God: The Significance of Domestic Textile Designs in the Early Byzantine Period," *DOP* 44 (1990): 215–24; and idem, *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton, 1996). Also see idem, *Rhetoric, Nature and Magic in Byzantine Art* (Aldershot, UK, 1998).

15 On magic and talismans in Islam, see F. Leoni, *Power and Protection: Islamic Art and the Supernatural* (Oxford, 2016); and V. Porter, L. Saif, and E. Savage-Smith, "Medieval Islamic Amulets, Talismans, and Magic," in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, vol. 1, *From the Prophet to the Mongols*, ed. F. B. Flood and G. Necipoğlu (Oxford, 2017), 521–57.

16 The lamps are discussed in Sh. Hadad and E. Khamis, "Inscribed Pottery Lamps from the Early Islamic Period at Beth Shean," *IEJ* 48.1/2 (1998): 66–76.

of their texts was intentional, or an outcome of the scribe's illiteracy in Arabic, or failure to prepare a negative die-cut that would produce a positive impression. Regardless, the significance of the side-by-side existence of two texts that are unmistakable pronouncements of Christian and Islamic beliefs goes beyond their hypothetically premeditated nature of orientation. What makes this synchronism noteworthy is the fact that it is an imprint of the multifaith and polyglot terrain in which mirror writing first makes its appearance.

The comfortable copresence of a Christian and Islamic statement of faith on the same surface may seem incongruous at first, given the stark dialectical opposition professed by some contemporaneous representatives of the two religions.¹⁷ However, existing artifacts, such as a wool and linen tapestry belonging to the Pfister Collection in the Vatican, would seem to suggest that such alignments were not at all rare. The Pfister piece, which postdates the oil lamps by at least a century, is comprised of two fragments. Both pieces display two highly angular and schematized, but nonetheless legible, Arabic texts on the upper and lower sides of a horizontal band running along the cloth's width. On the more complete lower fragment is again the Islamic formula, "[In the name] of God, the merciful, the compassionate," followed by "... for the possessor ..." and "at the private *ṭirāz* [workshop]." A more complete version of the same text, reading "for the possessor" and "which was made at the private *ṭirāz*," appears above this fragmentary line, inscribed in reverse.¹⁸ Unlike other objects with multifaith expressions, this tapestry does not feature an accompanying text in a script other than Arabic. Importantly, though, conspicuous Coptic

17 For interactions between Arabs and Christians in the region, see, for instance, J. Meyendorff, "Byzantine Views of Islam," *DOP* 18 (1964): 113–32; S. H. Griffith, "Theodore Abū Qurrah's Arabic Tract on the Christian Practice of Venerating Images," *JAOS* 105.1 (1985): 53–73; and, more recently, J. N. Tajir, *Christians in Muslim Egypt: An Historical Study of the Relations between Copts and Muslims from 640 to 1922* (Altenberge, Germany, 1998); M. Bonner, ed., *Arab–Byzantine Relations in Early Islamic Times* (Aldershot, UK, 2004); P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith* (New York, 2011); and T. Wolińska and P. Filipczak, eds., *Byzantium and the Arabs: The Encounter of Civilizations from Sixth to Mid-Eighth Century* (Lodz, Poland, 2015), esp. pt. 3.

18 Described in G. Cornu, *Tissus islamiques de la collection Pfister* (Vatican City, 1992), 491, photo no. BAV 6856. *Ṭirāz* refers to an inscribed cloth or a place of production for such. For studies on *ṭirāz*, see n. 40 below.

crosses that fill the medallions inside the horizontal band stand in for text, and imply a contact zone wherein artists or consumers with different religious affiliations routinely crossed paths. As it pertains to a history of muthanna, specifically, this bidoctrinal decoration also attests the deliberate planning and continued popularity of reversals in religious and spiritual contexts.

In addition to reversals, symmetrical layout—another foundational principle of muthanna—is observed in works that predate true mirror compositions. While the contiguity of Greek and Arabic bespeaks the continuities in the religious landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean during the first centuries of Muslim rule, an eye-catching mosaic panel from the Church of Saint George at the site of Khirbat al-Mukhayyat (Nebo), Jordan, suggests a long-established penchant for symmetrically laid-out inscriptions more than a century and a half before epigraphic design reached maturity in *ḥusn al-khaṭṭ* (fig. 5). Dated to ca. 535, the piece is executed in a combination of red, yellow, green, and black tesserae placed against a white background. Within a square frame filled with a simple but solid chain motif, two goats stand face to face on both sides of a central tree that forms the vertical axis. A pair of doves, the upper bodies of which are missing, is positioned above the tree, while two sets of plants—two small ones with three branches and two larger ones with five—occupy the area above the goats' heads. Inscribed between the two sets of plants, to the right and left of the tree, is a word in Greek and a word in what appears to be Arabic. The Greek word has been read as "Saola," which, according to Robert Schick, likely invokes repose for a deceased archdeacon named Saolos, whose name appears in two other mosaic inscriptions inside the church.¹⁹ A possible reading for the word on the left is the Arabic phrase *bi-salām* (in peace), although some scholars have proposed a Christian-Palestinian Aramaic reading of the two words as a single phrase: "give repose [and] give salvation."²⁰ If the Arabic reading is to be

19 R. Schick, "Mosaics during the Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods," in *Byzantium and Islam: Age of Transition, 7th–9th Century*, ed. H. C. Evans with B. Rariff (New York, 2012), 98–101. Schick describes this mosaic as "a rare example of a known Arabic inscription from the pre-Islamic Syria-Palestine region, and the only one in a mosaic floor." He notes that the use of Arabic in mosaic inscriptions, even in Muslim buildings, remained rare in the early Islamic period.

20 Ibid., 101.



Fig. 5.
Mosaic panel. Khirbat al-Mukhayyat, Jordan, ca. 535. Colored stone tesserae, 343 × 315 × 15 cm. Franciscan Archeological Institute, Jordan. Photo courtesy Carmelo Pappalardo.

accepted (and even if the text is perceived as a single sentence), the placement of the two words (or the breaking of a single unit into two parts) on both sides of a vertical axis—similar to the symmetrical positioning of the plants and the doves, though without a mirror reverse—presents an early practice in symmetrical configuration. I propose that such experiments with writing orientations then crystalized into an art form that Muslims and non-Muslims alike came to regard as being exclusively Islamic in origin.

But how widespread were exercises in writing directionalities? Do the inscriptions found on textiles, oil lamps, and mosaics discussed so far represent random and disconnected occurrences, or do they demonstrate sustained artistic trends? A tombstone inscription even older than the above mosaic suggests that rather than being vestiges of improvised experiments, such

configurations are imprints of prevailing practices in the aesthetics of textual design. Dated to between 140 and 160 based on its stylistic features, the hard limestone slab carved in high relief depicts a bust portrait of a young beardless man with curly hair, whose wide-open eyes on his thin and well-proportioned face are fixed in the distance, looking past the viewer. In a balanced, if not fully refined, composition similar to that of the mosaic, the texts on the slab are placed on either side of the man's head. The first inscription, beginning at mid-level of the figure's right ear, is an engraved and painted three-line Aramaic text that reads: "Iarhai, son of Zabd'ateh Hennibel." The second inscription, also engraved and painted, is a Greek translation of the same text, arranged in four lines. Beginning from below the man's left earlobe and extending down to his left shoulder, it contains the words: "Iaraios, son of Zabdathès,

son of Anibèlos.”²¹ When taken together, the inscriptions on the pavement mosaic and the funerary sculpture support my proposition that creative work in writing orientations was not exclusive to Muslim practitioners. As they point to the multilingual literacy of their commissioners, and at least some of their viewers, these pieces also reinforce the formal and conceptual connections between unilaterally symmetrical designs and muthanna.

Like reversals and symmetrically arranged texts, repetition—also a defining feature of muthanna—is prolific in inscriptions that predate mirror writing. They, too, are found on diverse media, in particular on ceramics, but their development can be traced more systematically to textiles. Scholars have attributed the formation and omnipresence of reversed and repeated motifs and inscriptions to the use of the two-beam drawloom, which facilitated a quick mechanical reversal and repetition of a source pattern.²² That the drawloom played an important role in the creation and dissemination of reversed and repeated texts, especially on silk, is indisputable. Yet a great number of surviving works and their semantic content demonstrate that the ensuing popularity of reversed, repeated, and bilaterally symmetrical inscriptions was not merely an outcome of technical convenience. Rather, similar to reversals, the repetition of figural or nonfigural motifs (such as gods, saints, crosses, ankhs, and evil eyes) was intended to enhance the image’s assumed protective powers, functioning like a charm that one attempts to activate and empower by reiterating it.

A large corpus of textiles attributed to the Fayyum lends further support to this interpretation of the motivation behind repeating inscriptions, while simultaneously bringing Christian and Islamic visual and religious praxis in unprecedented proximity.²³

21 J.-B. Yon, *Palmyre*, vol. 17.1 of *Inscriptions grecques et latines de la Syrie*, ed. L. Jalabert and R. Mouterde (Beirut, 2012), 329, fig. 426.

22 For a discussion of the technical aspects of drawlooms, see Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, especially 39–40, 46, and 51.

23 There is a plethora of literature on the stylistic, iconographic, and technical aspects of the so-called Coptic textiles, though their mirror inscriptions have not been studied. See, for instance, M. S. Dimand, “Coptic Tunics in the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 2.2 (1930): 239–52; L. R. Sibley, “A Late Coptic Tunic,” *Muse* 17 (1983): 81–95; E. D. Maguire, *Weavings from Roman, Byzantine and Islamic Egypt: The Rich Life and the Dance* ([Champaign, IL], 1999), 15; and T. K. Thomas, “Coptic and

Variously referred to as “Copto-Oriental,” “Copto-Islamic,” and, more recently, as “Egypto-Arabic,” this group of textiles consists mostly of fragments dispersed in public and private collections throughout Egypt, Europe, and North America. When examined in tandem, the inscriptions on these textiles reveal a shared idiom comprised of overwhelmingly spiritual content. Such a similarity, in turn, confirms belief in the apotropaic function of repeated and reversed inscriptions that was prevalent during the late antique period. This belief is prominently displayed on a largely intact wool and linen shawl, presently housed in the Louvre Museum. The decorative elements of this unassuming piece are arranged with finesse in a simple but robust composition: two horizontal bands that contain geometric forms run along the shawl’s width, with two lines of inscriptions above and below them. On the shawl’s upper portion, an Arabic text is placed above the band, with a Coptic one below. Counterbalancing this arrangement, on the lower fragment, the order is reversed, so that the Arabic text forms an outer border, and the Coptic an inner one. Scholars have proposed a reading of the Arabic inscription as “In the name of God. Complete prosperity to its owner,” followed by a statement that identifies a private factory of Tutun, in the district of Fayyum, as the place of production. The accompanying Coptic text features the words, “Lord Jesus Christ, protect Raphael, the son of Genarches” (fig. 6).²⁴ In both content and design, as it reinforces the agency of repetition for apotropaic purposes, the fabric allows the viewer to conceive the two seemingly incommensurate faith expressions not as dialectic opposites that divide a common space, but as an encounter of two complementary parallel lines.

The abundance of textiles decorated with reversed and repeated texts in Coptic and Arabic also points to the diversity and vibrancy of the local (and likely long-distance) markets for which they were produced.²⁵ A

Byzantine Textiles Found in Egypt: Corpora, Collections, and Scholarly Perspectives,” in *Egypt in the Byzantine World, 300–700*, ed. R. S. Bagnall (New York, 2007), 137–62.

24 M. Durand and F. Saragoza, eds., *Égypte, la trame de l’histoire: Textiles pharaoniques, coptes et islamiques* (Paris, 2002), 198, no. 165; and M. Durand, “Inscribed Fabrics from Egypt: A Study in Greek and Coptic Textile Epigraphy,” *Journal of Coptic Studies* 11 (2009): 157–80, at 173–74.

25 On the late antique markets for luxury textiles, see T. K. Thomas, “Perspectives on the Wide World of Luxury in Later

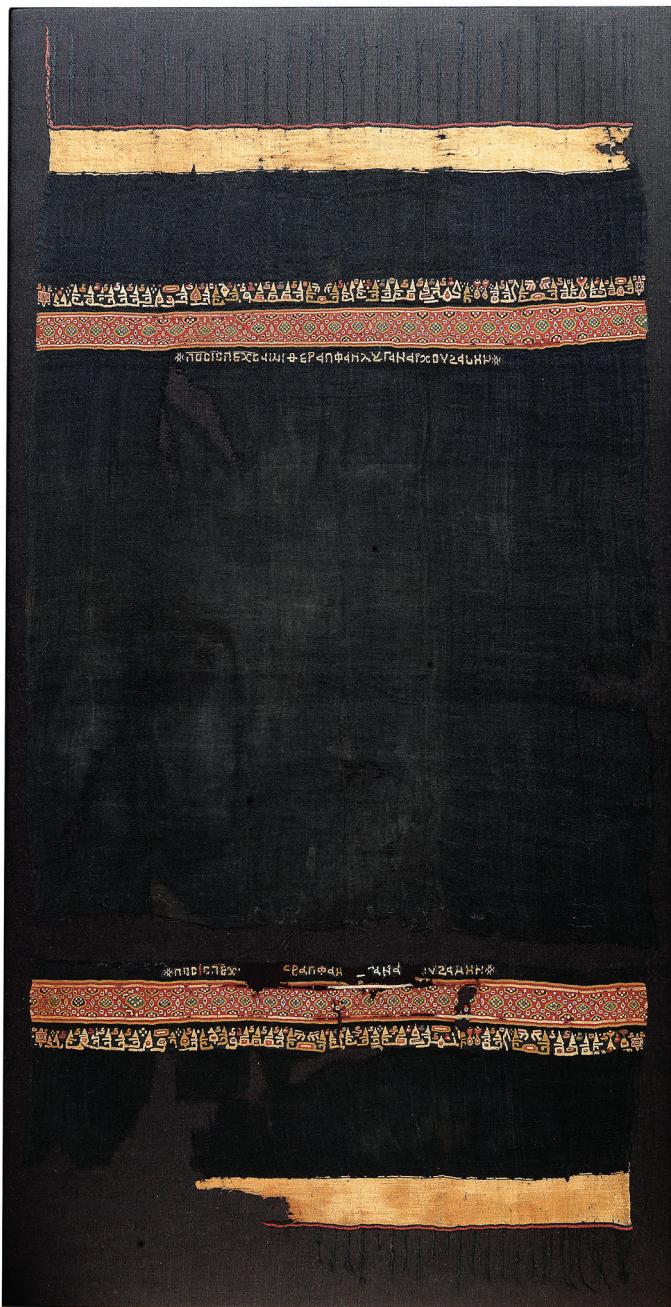


Fig. 6.

Tirāz. Fayyum, after the second half of the ninth century. Silk and wool, h. 113 cm. Paris, Louvre E 25405. Photo courtesy RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource.

Antiquity: Silk and Other Exotic Textiles Found in Syria and Egypt,” in *Silk: Trade and Exchange along the Silk Roads between Rome and China in Antiquity*, ed. B. Hildebrandt with C. Gillis (Oxford, 2017), 51–81. For a discussion of the Egyptian textile industry under Muslim rule, see J. A. Sokoly, “Towards a Model of Early Islamic Textile Institutions in Egypt,” *Riggisberger Berichte* 5 [*Islamische Textilkunst des Mittelalters: Aktuelle Probleme*] (1997): 115–22; and M. A. Marzouk, *History of Textile Industry in Alexandria, 331 B.C.–1517 A.D.* ([Alexandria, Egypt], 1955).

better understanding of these markets can be gleaned from two shawls made of wool, linen, and silk decorated with repeated inscriptions. The first piece, preserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, displays three lines of text—two in Coptic, and one in Arabic, with a possible now-lost fourth line also in Arabic—arranged in the same way as on the Louvre piece. The Arabic text is written in angular letters with stylized triangular

finials. It repeats the words *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (There is no god but God), with which the Muslim profession of faith begins. The accompanying Coptic text includes the words “for the joy that the . . .”²⁶ The second shawl, housed in the Cleveland Museum of Art, survives in two now-detached ends that are decorated with a horizontal band, featuring images of camels, hares, and possibly a horse and rider. Similar to the Louvre and Boston pieces, on both sides of each band are texts in Arabic and Coptic, repeated along the cloth’s width. Interestingly, while the Coptic letters are inscribed legibly, the Arabic text is highly schematized in angular letters resembling pinecones, attesting to the already established decorative appeal of the Arabic script. The Coptic text has been read as the biblical creedal affirmation, “Our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Arabic phrase possibly features both *lī-llāh* and *baraka*.²⁷

At this juncture, it is important to consider such juxtapositions of Greek or Coptic with an often highly abstracted Arabic as more than an attempt to enhance visual appeal to attract a larger pool of consumers. No doubt, the ensemble is noteworthy for it illustrates the operating principles of the craftsmen who worked to meet the high demand for everyday items such as these shawls by making quick changes to a stock of formulaic expressions and popular motifs. But these cloths are even more significant owing to their remarkable coalescence of two seemingly incompatible dicta, announcing on the one hand Jesus’s dual nature as human and divine, and rejecting on the other the existence of any supreme being other than the one God, each written in the scripts of their own faith. Reaching beyond the apotropaic function observed on inscriptions discussed so far, this coupling serves as a proclamation of cultural and linguistic continuity, rather than disintegration, in late antique Egypt under Muslim rule. As such, this material evidence marks the fluid contours of the hybrid landscape wherein Muslim artists cultivated the creative work of their predecessors and, in active and meaningful conversation with their contemporaries, contributed to the fashioning of a remarkably sophisticated calligraphic form.

26 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 11.1398. An early mention of this piece is found in N. P. Britton, *A Study of Some Early Islamic Textiles in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston, 1938), 42, fig. 18.

27 Cleveland Museum of Art 1956.330.

Converging Symmetries

Our inability to assign a precise date to late antique inscriptions that do not contain historical data prevents us from establishing with certainty the chronological relationship between reversed, repeated, and symmetrically arranged unidirectional texts on the one hand, and mirror compositions on the other. Even so, a number of Byzantine, Abbasid, and Fatimid textiles with shared designs, techniques, and systems of production, which Donald N. Wilber has described as illustrative of a “littoral style,” allow us to discern the relationships among these writing forms with greater clarity and to propose that mirror writing appeared as early as the seventh to ninth centuries.²⁸ In vogue in the Eastern Mediterranean between the third and eighth centuries, and suggestive of the movement of craftsmen in Syro-Palestine, Egypt, and Constantinople, the littoral style is characterized by a fixed repertoire of iconographies consisting of pagan and Christian figures (such as Osiris and Christ) and symbols (such as the *ankh* and the cross) that either metamorphose into one another or are placed side by side.²⁹ In a number of compelling studies, scholars of Byzantine art (e.g., Henry Maguire, Anna Muthesius, Thelma K. Thomas) have articulated the implications of this mixed group of iconographies for a religious and visual history of Christianity, concluding that such transfigurations and copresences of signs and symbols manifest belief systems and praxes that were not mutually exclusive. To be added to discussions about this ensemble of textiles is the hitherto overlooked proximity of Christian and Islamic motifs and inscriptions, arranged in mirror symmetry.

While mirror inscriptions have thus far been shown to be difficult to date with confidence, one Byzantine silk fragment from this group, dated to the seventh century based on its technical features, helps moor the art form in a more precise period. Such

28 D. N. Wilber, “Pagan and Christian Egypt: An Exhibition,” *AI* 9 (1942): 150–56.

29 On the shared iconographies of pagan and Christian art, see Maguire, “Garments Pleasing to God,” 220–21; and F. P. Morgan, *Dress and Personal Appearance in Late Antiquity: The Clothing of the Middle and Lower Classes* (Leiden, 2018), 45. For continuation of pagan motifs in Byzantine art, see K. Weitzmann, “The Survival of Mythological Representations in Early Christian and Byzantine Art and Their Impact on Christian Iconography,” *DOP* 14 (1960): 43–68, and Bagnall, *Egypt in the Byzantine World*.



Fig. 7.
Heraclius monogram.
Seventh century. Silk serge.
Cathedral Treasury, Liège.
J. Lessing, *Die Gewebe-Sammlung des K. Kunstgewerbe-Museums*, vol. 2
(Berlin, 1900), pl. 54:a.

accuracy in dating is achieved in part due to the fact that this fabric contains no Islamic references, unlike the bilingual and bidoctrinal pieces discussed above. Referred to as the “Heraclius silk,” and preserved at the Cathedral Treasury in Liège, the fabric strikes the eye with a compartmentalized but not stagnant repeat pattern in yellow on an attractive orange-red background (fig. 7). The repeat pattern consists of a four-leaved unit that encloses a small schematized plant motif in its center. Each unit is connected to the next on top and bottom with a hexagon that features one salient, albeit inconspicuous, element: a centrally placed monogram

of the emperor Heraclius (r. 610–641), marked by an *eta* (H) to the left of a cross, a *kappa* (K) to its right, an *alpha* (A) below, and an abbreviated “OU” above. The significance of this design is that every other monogram appears in mirror reverse, thereby serving as one of the earliest examples of a true mirror composition, with a terminus post quem of 610, the year of Heraclius’s ascension to the throne. This date is of great importance for a history of muthanna, since, according to Islamic tradition, it was in the same year that the Prophet Muḥammad began to receive revelations from God via the archangel Gabriel; and as noted earlier,

conversations around “beautiful writing” are linked to efforts to pen multiple copies of the Quran during the reign of caliph ‘Uthmān, one to three decades after the Prophet’s death in 632. The full-blown mirror design on this Byzantine silk thus helps to position, with certainty, this art form as occurring concurrent with, but more likely prior to, the birth of Islam, and, indisputably, before Muslim calligraphers had set in place the principles of calligraphic design.

According to textile specialist Anna Muthesius, Byzantine silks decorated with bilaterally symmetrical compositions featuring figurative images or nonfigurative (floral or geometric) designs were not uncommon, thanks to the two-beam drawloom technology that facilitated the application of a source motif first in the normal direction and then in mirror reverse.³⁰ Writing along the same lines, Louise Mackie has noted that this technical advancement played a central role in the dissemination of bilaterally symmetrical designs on fabrics produced in lands under Muslim rule as well.³¹ Despite this knowledge and the rigorous technical, curatorial, and art-historical research that characterizes textile studies in general, however, inquiry into mirror inscriptions appears to have fallen outside of scholarly interest, and no mention of another Byzantine monogram or text in mirror form seems to have been made.

This lack of further evidence precludes us from speculating about mirror writing’s popularity in Byzantine art beyond the Heraclius silk.³² Still, mirror inscriptions on another collection of fabrics, known as the “Akhmim textiles,” suggest that between the seventh and tenth centuries weaving technologies were instrumental in the development and dissemination of mirror texts as well, before architectural surfaces became the preferred medium around the eleventh century. Although the “Akhmim” group is a popular

topic in technical studies and museum catalogs of late antique textiles, owing to its notorious collection history, delicate materials, and ambiguous iconographies, mirror texts featured on multiple pieces in the corpus have received little to no scholarly attention. In age, script, and content, these textiles are significant, opening yet another window onto the heterogenous world of late antiquity.

Because the Swiss antiquarian and collector Robert Forrer, who first introduced this large group of textiles to the art market, conducted excavations in and around Akhmim (Panopolis) in Egypt, the ensemble has been ascribed this eponym wrongly.³³ The lack of archaeological records from the burial sites from where the items were carelessly, and often illicitly removed, in conjunction with our knowledge of multi-directional exchanges in late antique markets, suggest that the site of discovery may not be the same as the site of manufacture. Although the cloths’ provenance remains uncertain, based on stylistic and technical analyses, specialists have proposed Egyptian, Persian, or Byzantine workshops as possible locales of production; and using radiocarbon analyses they dated a group of samites within this corpus to the period 650–948, a timeframe that overlaps with the period of the littoral style.³⁴ Furthermore, although most of the existing pieces are fragments, larger portions have allowed specialists to identify a set of design families that are “visually striking and deliberately inter-cultural.”³⁵

The “Zacharias group” is a subset of textiles from this corpus. The grouping features silk clavus stripes, shoulder bands, sleeve bands, square and circular panels, and medallions created for the decoration of linen tunics. The fragments depict a male equestrian figure, whom scholars have described as a nobleman or a saint.³⁶ He is invariably shown as seated, in full control of a galloping horse, brandishing a mace. A bird of prey hovers

30 A. Muthesius, “Memory and Meaning: Graphic Sign and Abstract Symbol in Byzantine Silk Weaving (from the Sixth to Tenth/Eleventh Centuries),” in *Graphic Signs of Identity, Faith, and Power in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. I. Garipzhanov, C. Goodson, and H. Maguire (Turnhout, 2017), 351–81, at 356.

31 Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 49, 147.

32 Wolfgang Fritz Volbach notes the existence of other fragments of the Heraclius silk in the Madelbert shrine and in the Musée Diocésan, both in Liège, as well as in Marburg, Düsseldorf, and the Vatican. See his *Early Decorative Textiles*, trans. Y. Gabriel (London, 1969), 89, 116–18.

33 Forrer published some of his findings in *Römische und byzantinische Seiden-Textilien aus dem Gräberfeld von Akhmin-Panopolis* (Strassburg, 1891).

34 A. Stauffer, *Textiles of Late Antiquity* (New York, 1996), 9–10; A. De Moor, S. Schrenk, and C. Verhecken-Lammens, “New Research on the So-Called Akhmin Silks,” in *Textiles in Situ: Their Find Spots in Egypt and Neighbouring Countries in the First Millennium CE*, ed. S. Schrenk (Riggisberg, 2006), 85–94.

35 Thomas, “Perspectives on the Wide World of Luxury,” 58.

36 On the warrior saint theme, see C. Walter, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* (Aldershot, 2003).



Fig. 8.

Textile fragment featuring the name "Joseph." Egypt or Syria (?), seventh to ninth century (?). Compound twill in blue-violet and beige silk, 26 x 17 cm. Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks BZ.1956.2.

near his head, and beneath him stand the figure of a soldier (disproportionately smaller than the rider) and a feeding bird that resembles a crane. The composition is replicated in mirror reverse on the left side of a vertical axis formed by a vegetal band. While some fragments lack inscriptions, others (such as those in the collections of the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Cleveland Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the British Museum) feature the names of Zacharias (alternatively read as "Zachary" and "of Zacharias") or Joseph, inscribed in Greek script in mirror writing (fig. 8).³⁷ On all pieces the name is

consistently placed above the rider's head, with the source text commonly to the right in Zacharias pieces, and to the left in Joseph pieces.

The identities of Zacharias and Joseph remain a topic of dispute among scholars. Some have interpreted the leisurely setting, complete with animals and plants, as a hunting scene, and argued that the names are trademarks or master signatures of the workshops where the items were manufactured.³⁸ Others have proposed

from the group are Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Berlin 9258; Musée des Tissus, Lyon MT 29241; and the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore 83.684.

37 Cleveland Museum of Art 1947.193, Victoria and Albert Museum 303-1887, and British Museum 1904,0706.41. Other pieces

38 For this group of readings, see A. Muthesius, *Byzantine Silk Weaving: AD 400 to AD 1200*, ed. E. Kislinger and J. Koder (Vienna,

that these names could refer to Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, and to Joseph, the father of Christ—two holy figures highly revered among Egypt's Coptic Christians.³⁹ Regardless of whom they might be referencing, the names' consistent appearance marks the moment when mirror writing became an integral part of figurative iconographies.

While ambiguities about the iconography and inscription of the Zacharias group are internally consistent within a Coptic Christian and Greek context, a seeming incongruity on another subgroup of the "Akhmim" collection forces us to revise some of our preconceptions about late antique modes of representation. Consisting of silk roundels with varied color combinations and relative technical consistency, fragments in this subgroup depict the same iconography comprised of two bilaterally arranged figures of an equestrian Amazon, framed within a circular floral border.⁴⁰ Despite this similarity, however, the fabrics are distinguished from one another in subtle but telling ways. For instance, six medallions—preserved in the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inherited from the collection of Giorgio Sangiorgi), the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Los Angeles County Museum of

1997); N. Oikonomidès, "Silk Trade and Production in Byzantium from the Sixth to the Ninth Century: The Seals of Kommerkiarioi," *DOP* 40 (1986): 33–53, at 33; and M. Martiniani-Reber, *Lyon, Musée historique des tissus: Soieries sassanides, coptes et byzantines, V^e–XI^e siècles* (Paris, 1986). A fragment published by Hayford Peirce and Royall Tyler in *L'art byzantine* (2 vols., Paris, 1932–1934), 2: no. 192, presents an interesting variation in design in that while the male figure is absent, the name Zacharias is still woven into the fabric in mirror form. This lack of correlation between a figure and the name on this and possibly other pieces whose whereabouts are unknown might be the reason for scholars' interpretation of "Zacharias" as a trademark.

39 D. Shepherd, "A Coptic Silk," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 34.9 (1947): 216–17, 237; S. Pasi, "Gli affreschi della chiesa sotterranea di Deir Abu Hennis presso Antinooe," in *Studi in memoria di Patrizia Angiolini Martinelli*, ed. S. Pasi with A. Mandolesi (Bologna, 2005), 239–62; and Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 49–50, 127.

40 On this corpus, see J. A. Sokoly, "Between Life and Death: The Funerary Context of *Tiraz* Textiles," *Riggsberger Berichte* 5 (1997): 71–78; and Muthesius, *Byzantine Silk Weaving*. For studies on *tiraz* and other inscribed textiles, see B. O'Kane, "The Egyptian Art of the *Tiraz* in Fatimid Times," in *The World of the Fatimids*, ed. A. S. Melikian-Chirvani (Toronto, 2018), 178–89; G. Vikan, "Joseph Iconography on Coptic Textiles," *Gesta* 18.1 (1979): 99–108; and Y. K. Stillman, "New Data on Islamic Textiles from the Geniza," *Textile History* 10.1 (1979): 184–95, at 189.

Art, and the Musée National du Moyen Âge—display a small Coptic cross placed within the floral border, positioned directly above the heads of the Amazons.⁴¹ Others, such as a fragment currently housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum, have no cross.⁴² Finally, two other pieces at the Metropolitan Museum mark a significant turning point in the history of muthanna owing to their Arabic inscription (fig. 9).⁴³

Of the two fragments, the better-preserved one displays a bilaterally symmetrical figure of an Amazon against an unfilled red background. She is mounted on a finely dressed, if disproportionately smaller, rearing horse that is trampling under its forelegs a prey that appears to be a cheetah. With heads turned in opposite directions, the muscular lower bodies of the rider and her mount overlap and merge, communicating the pair's harmony, and the physical power they accord one another. The Amazon's upper body is sharply turned to face the viewer, revealing in full detail her bared left breast, and her wavy hair is blown by the wind, creating a well-controlled tension within the scene. With tensely stretched arms, and hands clutching the bow and arrow, the heroine sits determinedly affixed on the rearing horse, which she controls effortlessly.⁴⁴ Most engrossing of all this imagery, though, is the presence of the quranic phrase *hasbiya Allāh* (God is sufficient for me; Q 9:129; 39:38) inscribed above the Amazon's head, again in mirror symmetry.

41 Dumbarton Oaks BZ 1946.15; Metropolitan Museum of Art 1987.442.5; Victoria and Albert Museum 817-1903 and 2185A-1900; Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.57.4; and Musée National du Moyen Âge Cl. 21840 (formerly in the Claudius Côte collection). For illustration of the last piece, see Peirce and Tyler, *L'art byzantine*, 2, pl. 186; and S. Desrosiers, *Soieries et autres textiles de l'antiquité au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 2004), 202, no. 99. There also exist fragments with missing top portions where a cross might or might not have been present. See, for instance, Victoria and Albert Museum 2186-1900; Cleveland Museum of Art 1952.104; Metropolitan Museum of Art 27.58.1; and Abegg-Stiftung 3167.

42 Victoria and Albert Museum 2181-1900.

43 Metropolitan Museum of Art 51.57 and 1987.440.1.

44 For depictions of lions and cheetahs on Amazon fragments, see G. Sangiorgi, "Cimeli dell'industria tessile orientale," *L'arte* (1906): 193–98, at 196, fig. 3, <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/arte1906/0233>; A. U. Pope, *A Survey of Persian Art, from Prehistoric Times to the Present*, 18 vols. (Tehran, 1967–), 14:1514; and *2000 Years of Silk Weaving: An Exhibition Sponsored by the Los Angeles County Museum in Collaboration with the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Detroit Institute of Arts* (New York, 1944), pl. 5:16.



Fig. 9.
Amazon fragment featuring the quranic phrase *ḥasbiya Allāh* (God is sufficient for me; Q 9:129, 39:38) in mirror form. Egypt or Syria (?), seventh to ninth century (?). Silk, 24 × 17 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art 51.57. Photo courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1951; public domain.

There exists no known historical record of the precise date of transition from Greek to Arabic on textiles that could help date this remarkable moment, when a pagan image is crowned by an Arabic phrase rather than a Greek text. As we can infer from archaeological data, the use of Arabic on this Amazon fragment, as well as on the oil lamps discussed above, was not unusual at a time when non-Muslims decorated their places and objects of worship with words in Arabic script, including the word *Allāh*. Yet the inclusion of not just God's name but a phrase that is repeated several times in the Quran in variant forms, and featured in mirror form until at least the fifteenth century in indisputably

Islamic contexts (such as inside the Mexuar Oratory at the Alhambra Palace), intimate a Muslim clientele for the piece and a time when Egypt's heterogenous population was largely under Muslim rule.⁴⁵

In a study of the training of scribes in Egypt, Scott Bucking has discussed how Greek and Coptic were still being used in administrative correspondence at the beginning of the eighth century, although Arabic was

⁴⁵ E.g., Q 3:173; 9:59; 8:64; 65:3. For the Alhambra muthanna compositions, see J. M. Puerta Vílchez, *Reading the Alhambra: A Visual Guide to the Alhambra through Its Inscriptions* ([Granada]: The Alhambra and Generalife Trust Edilux, 2011).

the official language of administration.⁴⁶ According to Bucking, Coptic was probably most critical for business dealing with the local population, while either Greek or Arabic, or both, were used for internal and external business. Bucking's compelling discussion of a polyglot administrative system in Egypt seems to contradict a popular historical account by the tenth-century author al-Bayhaqī, who, in his *Kitāb al-Mahāsin wa-al-masāwi* (The book of merits and defects), reports that Greek was replaced by Arabic abruptly during the reign of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705). According to al-Bayhaqī's narrative, one day when 'Abd al-Malik was conducting state affairs, he was handed a paper with a Greek stamp on it. The inquisitive caliph asked that the inscription be translated into Arabic. Upon finding out that the text read, "Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit," 'Abd al-Malik ordered 'Abd al-Azīz ibn Marwān (his brother and the governor of Egypt) to change the Greek *protocollon* on all objects produced for the state (textiles included) to an Arabic inscription containing the first part of the shahāda (There is no god but God) and the seven verses of *sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* (Q 112), in which God describes himself as unbegotten and unequalled.⁴⁷ Although this is an interesting account, the continued production of bilingual textiles until the end of the tenth century seems to challenge the report that the dramatic change that 'Abd al-Malik ordered was implemented overnight.

As scholars' understanding of the details of the transition from Greek to Arabic script continues to grow, the Amazon roundel's visual complexity raises additional questions regarding iconography and meaning. Admittedly, Amazon iconography was neither a novelty nor an oddity in Roman times. On a shield from Dura-Europos, dating to before 256, for instance, Amazons are represented not as hunting, but as fighting. Regardless, the position of the arrow-shooting warrior and her horse, together with the flying-scarf motif

46 S. Bucking, "On the Training of Documentary Scribes in Roman, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Egypt: A Contextualized Assessment of the Greek Evidence," in *ZPapEpi* 159 (2007): 229–47, at 240. Also relevant is S. Rubenson, "The Transition from Coptic to Arabic," *Égypte/Monde arabe* 27–28 (1996): 77–92.

47 Quoted in R. B. Serjeant, "Material for a History of Islamic Textiles up to the Mongol Conquest," *AI* 9 (1942): 54–92, at 65–66. Serjeant notes that very little is known about al-Bayhaqī. Also mentioned in J. Sokoly, "Textiles and Identity," in Flood and Necipoğlu, *Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture*, 1:275–99, at 276–77.

found on some fragments, suggests that the pattern found on textiles (including those aforementioned) might have been modeled on a prototype such as that preserved in Dura.⁴⁸ Irrespective of its origin, one is led to question the meaning this iconography held for a Muslim clientele. Was the juxtaposition of a pagan image with a quranic text a failed attempt to match two designs drawn on separate cartoons? Or was this a creative enterprise within the fluid parameters of contemporary religious art?

Like the other motifs within the larger "Akhmim" group, the Amazon motif survives in multiples. However, it is presented with variations in design, as can be observed in the inclusion of either a cross or the quranic phrase *ḥasbiya Allāh*, or the lack thereof.⁴⁹ Making a weaver's blunder in design-matching unlikely, these variations instead point to a marketing strategy to attract a mixed pool of pagan, Christian, and Muslim buyers. The shrewdness of this inclusive approach becomes more comprehensible in light of our knowledge of Muslims' familiarity with the fighting female motif. We see traces of this acquaintance in popular oral and written Arab traditions that tell stories of female warriors, such as *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma*, where the main protagonist, Qannāṣa, is accompanied by a large number of other heroines. As Remke Kruk has shown, these women, who are different from "the beautiful and sweet-tempered" heroines of the *Arabian Nights*, play conspicuous roles in Arab epics. In fact, many of them are portrayed as enemy warriors, who are engaged in a cycle of battles that ends with their defeat by Muslim forces and their marriage to a Muslim hero.⁵⁰ Subsequently, they convert to Islam and join

48 One of these shields is illustrated in E. J. Grube, "Studies in the Survival and Continuity of Pre-Muslim Traditions in Egyptian Islamic Art," *JARCE* 1 (1962): 75–97, pl. 14:2.

49 In "Materials and Techniques of Late Antique and Early Islamic Textiles Found in Egypt" (in Evans, *Byzantium and Islam*, 161–64), Kathrin Colburn references a small number of sketches on papyri identified as cartoons, and notes that they were created for the production and circulation of bilaterally symmetrical designs. Sheila Blair also mentions the transfer of designs from cartoons to textiles in "Inscriptions on Medieval Islamic Textiles," *Riggisberger Berichte* 5 (1997): 95–104, at 95–96.

50 R. Kruk, "Warrior Women in Arabic Popular Romance: Qannāṣa bint Muzāḥīm and Other Valiant Ladies," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 24 (1993): 213–30, at 219.

Muslims in their war against the “infidels,” often identified as Byzantine Christians.⁵¹

Muslims’ penchant for the female warrior motif is also apparent in an illustration accompanying Zakariyyā b. Muḥammad al-Qazvīnī’s *Ajā’ib al-makhlūqāt wa-gharā’ib al-mawjūdāt* (The wonders of created beings and oddities of existing things), dated to 1388.⁵² Rendered in a provincial style, the painting depicts Iskandar (Alexander the Great, who appears in Islamic literature as an exemplary ruler) mounted on his horse in his royal garb, in no need of armor, even though he is engaged in battle with two Amazons. The Amazons are shown standing, their legs bent and stretched in a fighting position, wielding long swords, and guarding themselves with large metal shields. They are depicted with a Muslim audience in mind, wearing ankle-length skirts underneath long robes, and head-scarves wrapped around their faces, revealing only their eyes. Along with the oral and written accounts of the fighting female figure, this fourteenth-century appropriation of the Amazon motif makes the iconography on the Metropolitan fragments more salient and telling than at first glance. Within this broader framework, the “Akhmim” fragments intimate that during the age of transition from Byzantine to Islamic rule in the Eastern Mediterranean, neither the linguistic shift from Greek to Arabic script nor the segue from non-Islamic motifs to Islamic ones took place quickly or universally.

In their pioneering research on the early centuries of Islam in South Asia and Africa respectively, Finbarr Barry Flood and François-Xavier Fauvelle have independently demonstrated that the changes that Muslim rulers were willing or able to impose on the populations in their newly captured territories were considerably less sweeping and systematic than scholars have long assumed. Examining material remains (ranging from bicultural coins struck by the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir bi-llāh (r. 908–932), which juxtapose the caliph’s name with an image of Shiva’s bull, to the

51 According to Kruk, scholars do not know when these popular epics first appeared, though some of the heroes are mentioned in stories dating to the tenth century. For a historical and literary analysis of these epics, see R. Kruk, *The Warrior Women of Islam: Female Empowerment in Arabic Popular Literature* (London, 2014), 2–3. See also eadem, “The Princess Maymūnah: Maiden, Mother, Monster,” *Oriente moderno*, n.s. 22.2 (2003): 425–42.

52 Bibliothèque nationale, Supplement Persan 332, folio 201v. Illustrated in Kruk, *Warrior Women of Islam*, pl. 4.

Ethiopian church of Lalibela, which blends Aksumite, Coptic, and Islamic elements) unearthed in mercantile towns far from the seat of the caliphate in Baghdad, the authors have compellingly argued that the predominant Islamic trend in these regions was to adopt and adapt rather than to seize and obliterate.⁵³

Against this background, mirror writing emerges as another piece of material evidence that helps us understand Muslims’ pragmatic efforts to carve out their place among their new subjects and alongside their rivals. The formal and semantic similarities inherent in mirror inscriptions fashioned in non-Islamic and Islamic contexts discussed so far do not point to an art form that operated within an insular aesthetic, religious, or intellectual realm. Rather, this syncretism bears the mark of encounters and transmutations of multifarious identities. It also confirms that in the Eastern Mediterranean, just as the transition from paganism to monotheism was not unilinear, much less instantaneous, so too was the transformation of Christian visual indices into Islamic ones—thus constituting a long-term process.

At the same time, mirror writing’s globalism was not irreconcilable with its ability to serve distinct and competing identities and purposes. Therefore, to assume that Muslims’ appropriation of this art form was a natural outcome of extemporaneous social interaction or subliminal acculturation would be to undermine their awareness of the power of a shared visual language, and their ability to successfully exploit it. As Hayrettin Yücesoy has pointed out in his analysis of the ninth-century Abbasid translations of Greek works into Arabic, the act of adopting a language, or promoting a language other than one’s own, is often-times a political act, an exercise in power.⁵⁴ In my view, Muslims’ integration of mirror writing into their nascent aesthetic grammar, and their prompt elevation of it to a sophisticated branch of Islamic art, were likewise part of a strategy to assert themselves into the contemporary religiopolitical scene. This reiteration and eventual remaking of a common artistic idiom was also

53 Flood, *Objects of Translation*, 25–26; and F.-X. Fauvelle, *The Golden Rhinoceros: Histories of the African Middle Ages* (Princeton, 2018), 154–59.

54 H. Yücesoy, “Language of Empire: Politics of Arabic and Persian in the Abbasid World,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 130.2 (2015): 384–92.

a stipulation of the Muslim vision of a world empire that the competing dynasties in Abbasid Baghdad, Tulunid and Fatimid Egypt, and Seljuq Iran separately pursued against their common foes. To better articulate what was at stake for Islam's flag bearers, we must first consider another mirror composition in Arabic.

This mirror text in Arabic is found on a pair of shoulder bands in close chronological proximity to the Zacharias group discussed earlier. The pair, also at the Victoria and Albert Museum, is similar to a third fragment in the same collection, suggesting production in multiple quantities.⁵⁵ Attributed to Egypt or Syria, and dated to between the seventh and ninth centuries, all three bands are composed of woven compound twill silk. One of the vertical bands on the pair includes in its current condition four fully preserved registers—two rectangular and two square. Of the two square registers, the one on top contains a vegetal motif, while the one on the bottom is decorated with a highly schematized double-handled vase with sprouting leaves, both with symmetrical halves. A male figure and its mirror image stand in each of the rectangular registers, placed symmetrically on both sides of a fanciful tree that serves as a vertical axis for the composition. Standing beneath the tree, with one foot raised and a stick (or a spear) in hand, the animated figures are likely harvesters or soldiers, recalling the figures on the Zacharias and Joseph pieces discussed above. With the exception of the variations in the lush tree's leaves, the motifs within the two rectangular registers appear to be identical.

Although undoubtedly Greco-Roman in iconography and style, the fabric communicates its religio-political context through an Arabic inscription that is situated between the upper rectangular and lower square registers, and separated from them with a horizontal line above and below. The inscription, which has confounded scholars (likely due to the letters' slightly askew form, and the placement of the source text to the left of the vertical axis—marked by two short horizontal strokes—instead of the more common placement on the right) features the words *illā Ḥaṣā* ([There is] none other than Jesus) (fig. 10).

⁵⁵ Victoria and Albert Museum accession nos. 2150-1900 and 768-1893. For a detailed discussion of these bands in relation to the larger group of "Akhnim" textiles, see J. T. Beckwith, "Textiles Found in Egypt Which Appear to Date from after the Arab Conquest until the Early Fatimid Period," *Ciba Review* 12 (1959): 21-27.



Fig. 10.
Shoulder band
featuring the phrase
illā Ḥaṣā ([There is]
none other than Jesus).
Egypt or Syria (?),
seventh to ninth
centuries. Woven silk,
56 x 10 cm. London,
Victoria and Albert
Museum 2150-1900.
Photo courtesy the
Victoria and Albert
Museum.

The significance of this inscription for a history of muthanna cannot be overemphasized. On the one hand, it illustrates on a medium other than paper (such as an administrative document or a religious manuscript) the increased prevalence of written Arabic among Christians—likely Egypt's Copts—living under Muslim rule. On the other hand, unlike the textiles and oil lamps discussed above on which Christian and Muslim faith expressions comprise two parts of a single unit, intimating a dialogue, in its singularity this inscription engages with a major point of contention between Christianity and Islam (Jesus's nature as human and divine, which Islam categorically rejects) in a monologue. At the same time, the text bears a striking parallel to the beginning of the shahāda, "There is no god but God (*illā Allāh*)," therefore inviting a reading of this phrase not in isolation, but as part of a two-way polemic between Christians and Muslims. That by the late ninth and early tenth centuries this polemic had caused the previously casual and convenient coexistence of faith expressions and scripts to appear markedly unsuitable is clear from the increased number of textiles decorated solely in Arabic script, devoid of an accompanying Greek or Coptic text, as well as of figurative imagery. Notably, these fabrics are unified by their inscriptions that feature in repeated form part of the shahāda or the quranic concept *al-mulk li-llāh* (the dominion belongs to God) (figs. 11 and 12).⁵⁶

Interestingly, it was at this same time that the phrase *al-mulk li-llāh* was also adopted by mirror compositions, quickly becoming their most recurrent motif for the next four centuries. The remarkably large volume of ninth- and tenth-century wool and silk textiles incorporating the phrase *al-mulk li-llāh* communicates the popularity of cloths with mirror inscriptions as markers of identity.⁵⁷ But this ubiquity also calls

56 A fabric that features the first part of the shahāda in repeated form is a wool and linen tapestry attributed to the Fayum, presently in the Bouvier Collection (accession no. JFB 1 134). Tirāz fragments featuring in repeated form the phrase *al-mulk li-llāh* are found in the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum (accession nos. 978.76.62, 963.95.9, and 978.76.373), the Textile Museum, Washington, DC (inventory no. 73.90), and the Cleveland Museum of Art (accession no. 1968.248). Such fragments are found also in private collections. See, for instance, A. Baginski and A. Tidhar, *Textiles from Egypt: 4th–13th Centuries C.E.* (Jerusalem, 1980), nos. 267 and 268.

57 See, for instance, the fragments illustrated in C. J. Lamm, "Some Woollen Tapestry Weavings from Egypt in Swedish Museums," *Le monde oriental* 30 (1936), pl. 15:c; and R. Pfister, "Matériaux pour servir

our attention to this particular configuration's appeal beyond aesthetics: to proclaim God's unmitigated sovereignty in a visual language in which Christians and Muslims were equally literate. No doubt, neither party would be willing to alter their perception of God's nature, and yet the variations in iconographies into which the words *al-mulk li-llāh* were integrated indicate that the interplay between points of negotiation and dissent was not entirely immutable either.

On a fragment presently in the Pfister collection in the Vatican, for instance, the expression *al-mulk li-llāh*, written in angular characters, is arranged in mirror form and repeated multiple times on both sides of a horizontal band filled with repeated figures of a schematized camel.⁵⁸ On another fragment in the same collection, the same phrase is executed in letters with triangular finials, but the band that it surrounds on all four sides contains bilaterally placed figures of a horse.⁵⁹ A third fragment, preserved in the Textile Museum in Washington, DC, is more remarkable in its iconographic modification. This cloth displays the same phrase in characters with more refined triangular finials, again arranged in mirror form and repeated above and below a horizontal band, but the band introduces a distinctive feature: an abstract orant figure (fig. 13). Not unlike the aforementioned Jerash-type oil lamps, where a Christian and a Muslim phrase are juxtaposed, this arrangement confirms that during the first four centuries of Islam the line that marked even the most hotly disputed religious point of contention was surprisingly porous.

Within a century or so following the appearance of mirror compositions that feature the phrase *al-mulk li-llāh*, the quranic phrase *naṣrun min Allāh wa-faṭḥun qarib* (Help from God and a near victory, Q 61:13) was added to the repertoire of tirāz inscriptions, first in repeated form, and later in muthanna.⁶⁰ By the fif-

au classement des textiles égyptiens postérieurs à la conquête arabe," *Revue des arts asiatiques* 10.2 (1936): 73–85, at pl. 28.

58 Cornu, *Tissus islamiques*, 86, no. BAV 6858.

59 Ibid., 486, no. BAV 6868, and pl. 4. A seemingly identical fragment is illustrated in Baginski and Tidhar, *Textiles from Egypt*, 169, no. 267.

60 The phrase *naṣrun min Allāh* is displayed in repeated form on a linen fragment woven in silk and gold leaf, preserved in the Royal Ontario Museum (accession no. 978.76.191); on an embroidered linen fragment housed in the Aga Khan Museum (accession no. AKM 675); and on two tapestry fragments in the Detroit Institute



Fig. 11. Textile fragment featuring the phrase *al-mulk li-llāh* (the dominion belongs to God). Fayyum, ca. tenth century. Wool, 20 × 42 cm. Washington, DC, Dumbarton Oaks BZ.1933.25.



Fig. 12. Ṭirāz fragment featuring the first part of the shahāda. Iran, used in Egypt, tenth century. Glazed *mulham*, woodblock-printed ink inscription with gold leaf, 18 × 37 cm. Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum 963.95.3. Photo courtesy the Royal Ontario Museum.



Fig. 13.
Tapestry featuring the phrase *al-mulk li-llāh* (the dominion belongs to God). Ca. ninth to tenth century. Wool, 54 × 68 cm. Washington, DC. Textile Museum 73.10. Photo courtesy the George Washington University Museum and the Textile Museum.

teenth century the two complementary phrases had become hallmarks of mirror design, as evinced by their display on diverse media ranging from war banners to architectural surfaces (most famously on the imperial gate of the Topkapı Palace in Ottoman Istanbul), often cast in bronze, embroidered in silk or gold thread, or gilded. When examined in tandem, the ubiquitous display and wide circulation of these expressions in lands stretching from Iran and Anatolia to Egypt and Spain make explicit the message directed at a mixed Muslim and non-Muslim clientele: victory belongs to the one God, possessor of the dominion. The texts' all-inclusive rhetoric, along with calligraphers' concentrated efforts

to create novel and more sophisticated designs, suggest that Muslims' swift, enthusiastic, and decisive appropriation of mirror writing was far from ideology-free. Rather, this acquisition was an emphatic manifestation of Muslim literacy in a late antique koine, and a token of aesthetic refinement and monetary strength, which were preconditions for their active participation in it.

Conclusion

From the tenth century on, while reversed and repeated inscriptions remained in use, the production of textiles with mirror texts in Arabic featuring Islamic formulae dramatically grew. The sway of Arabic texts in mirror compositions did not, however, lead to immediate or wholesale elimination of pre- or non-Islamic (Sasanian, Coptic, or Byzantine) iconographic repertoires on textiles. Bilaterally symmetrical figures of griffins, sphinxes, peacocks, panthers, and birds continued to be juxtaposed with mirror texts in Arabic until well into the fourteenth century, as can be observed on a silk and gold lampas attributed to eastern Iran or Central Asia (fig. 14), or on satin damasks produced for the Mamluk sultan al-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn

of Arts (accession nos. 29.388 and 29.389). A shawl fragment from the Coptic cemetery in Naqlun, Egypt, also features the same phrase in repeated form, testifying to the popularity of textiles with Arabic among the local Christian population. For the Naqlun piece, see G. Helmcke, "Textiles with Arabic Inscriptions Excavated in Naqlun 1999–2003," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean Reports* 16 (2004): 195–202. An example of a muthanna form of the phrase is found on a turban preserved at the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva (accession no. JFB I 23), illustrated in *Tissus d'Égypte témoins du monde arabe VIII^e–XV^e siècles: Collection Bouvier* (Thonon-les-Bains, France, 1993), 198, no. 117.

Fig. 14.

Lampas with parrots and dragons. Eastern Iran or Central Asia, first half of the fourth century. Silk and gold thread, 72.5 x 36 cm.

Berlin, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 1875,258.



(r. 1293–1341).⁶¹ Likewise in Spain, as late as the thirteenth century, mirror inscriptions on textiles coexisted with scenes of fantastical creatures.⁶² When compared geographically, temporally, and iconographically, these inscriptions provide us with two significant pieces of

61 Musée des Tissus, Lyon, MT 28476. Fabrics from Ibn Qalawūn's reign are preserved in the Egyptian Textiles Museum in Cairo. For illustrations of other pieces from the period of Ibn Qalawūn, see Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 260, 263.

62 For examples of Hispano-Islamic textiles with mirror inscriptions, see O. von Falke, *Decorative Silks*, new ed. (New York, 1922); F. L. May, *Silk Textiles of Spain: Eighth to Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1957); A. E. Wardwell, "A Fifteenth-Century Silk Curtain from Muslim Spain," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 70.2 (Feb., 1983): 58–72; and Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, chap. 5.

information. In the first place, they demonstrate that the pivotal element of mirror writing was the design rather than the script in which a text was inscribed (Greek, Latin, or Arabic). The design's independence from the script further enhanced the universal appeal of bilateral symmetry, and facilitated mirror compositions' transmission within and beyond the Eastern Mediterranean. In the second place, the linguistic, cultural, and religious malleability of mirror inscriptions demonstrates that the art form that Muslims have been celebrating as exclusively their own for the past thirteen or so centuries transcends the divides between paganism and monotheism, Christianity and Islam, East and West, center and periphery. When viewed from interconnected perspectives no longer apprehended in a void,

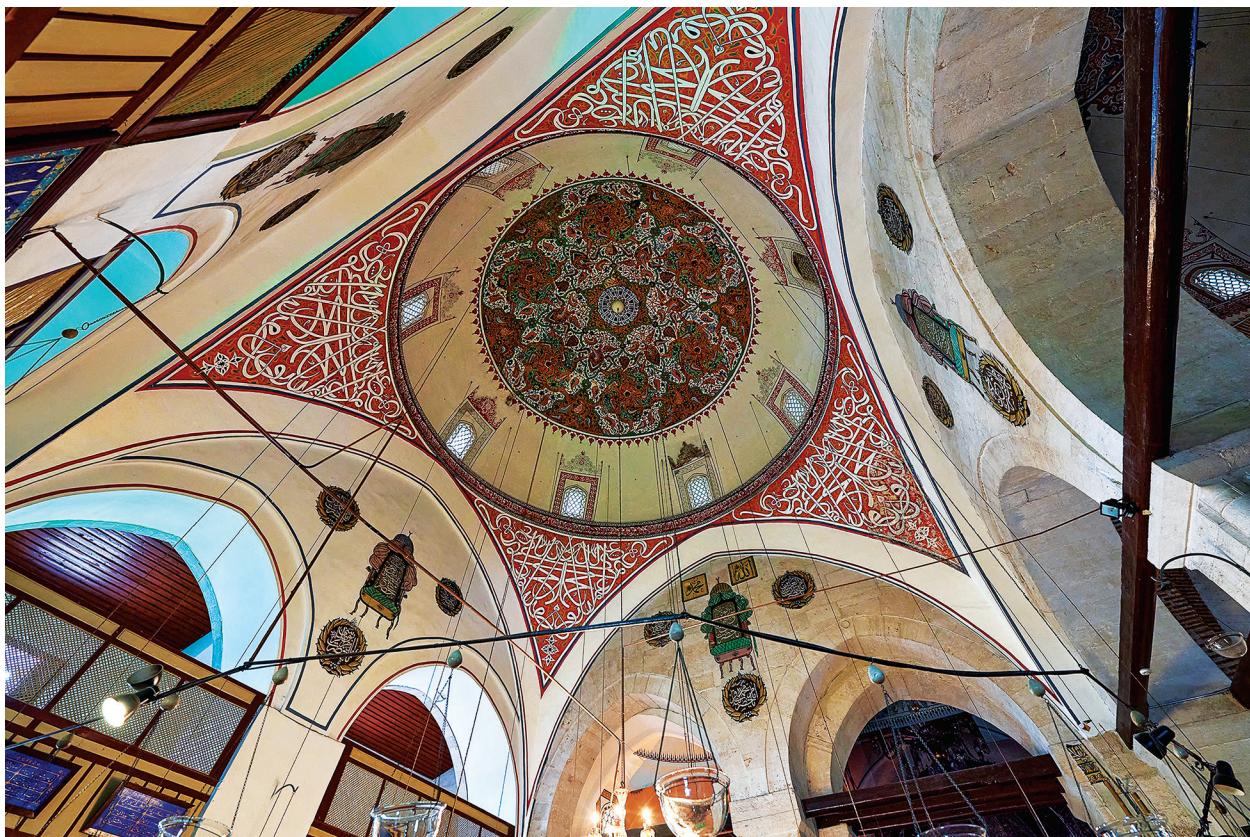


Fig. 15. Pendentives featuring the names Allāh, Muḥammad, and Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and 'Alī, the four Rightly Guided caliphs, in muthanna. Semahane, tomb of Mawlānā Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Konya, Turkey. Photo by author.

this subcategory of *husn al-khaṭṭ* becomes a remarkable, if long overlooked and misunderstood, expression of cross-cultural exchange in the visual realm.

My assertion that Muslims' ownership of mirror writing was part of their vision of governance in newly occupied territories finds further support in the intriguing decline of compositions in non-Arabic scripts beginning from the late tenth century, and their subsequent disappearance at the end of the fifteenth century. Indisputably unrelated to the question of technology (the drawloom continued to be available to craftsmen catering to Christian buyers), this decline can be attributed to the greater aesthetic potential of the Arabic script, where letters can be connected or disconnected, and expanded or contracted at the artist's will. But this loss of interest can also indicate Christians' desire to disassociate themselves from a shared aesthetic idiom that came to be identified quickly and pervasively with Islam. In a noted instance

of refusal to participate in a common language whose signs and boundaries were no longer conveniently fluid, the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 685–706) gained the upper hand in a "war of images" with Byzantium by imposing purely epigraphic iconography on Arab coinage, thus severing Islam's ties with pagan and Christian visual grammars.⁶³ If Muslims' appropriation of mirror writing did indeed play a role in the disappearance of compositions in Greek and Latin, however, this did not prevent Christian patrons from appreciating the aesthetics of the art form or acknowledging the prestige

⁶³ On 'Abd al-Malik's coinage reform, see M. Humphreys, "The 'War of Images' Revisited: Justinian II's Coinage Reform and the Caliphate," *NC* (1966–) 173 (2013): 229–44. On the related topic of Caliph al-Yazīd II's (r. 720–724) edict on images, see C. C. Sahner, "The First Iconoclasm in Islam: A New History of the Edict of Yazīd II (AH 104/AD 723)," *Der Islam* 94.1 (2017): 5–56. I thank *DOP*'s anonymous reviewer for the latter reference.

of the Arabic script.⁶⁴ Countless inscribed objects (such as shrouds, draperies, and pyxides placed in royal and papal burial sites and treasuries) and architectural epigraphy (such as the blue-and-white tile panel on the portal of the Alcázar of Seville) bear witness to the high regard Christian consumers held for Arabic muthanna, at least until the end of the fifteenth century, when Muslims were expelled from Spain.⁶⁵

The rich body of muthanna designs from the early and middle periods of Islam mirror one of the several tasks with which the calligraphers working within a rapidly expanding, if politically divided, Muslim empire were charged: to create a simultaneously familiar and distinct aesthetic idiom befitting a religious and imperial identity that Muslims had to negotiate within the near and far recesses of the Mediterranean. Crafting this idiom through a visual index that would be legible to audiences from diverse backgrounds—Sasanian,

⁶⁴ For examples of mirror compositions in what scholars have described as pseudo-Latin, see the silks from the Reliquary of Saint Librada in Sigüenza Cathedral, Spain, preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art (accession nos. 1952.15 and 1952.152) and the Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg (accession no. 2655 a–e).

⁶⁵ See, for instance, a pillow cover from the tomb of Queen Berengaria (d. 1246), now in the Museo de Telas Medievales, Monasterio de Santa María la Real de las Huelgas, Burgos (illustrated in Mackie, *Symbols of Power*, 190); a pyxis found in the cypress chest of Leo III (d. 816) under the altar of Sancta Sanctorum, now in the Vatican (illustrated in *Catalogo del Museo Sacro della Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, no. A74); and the rectangular blue-and-white tile panel above the main portal of the Alcázar of Seville, Spain, illustrated in Akın-Kivanç, *Muthanna / Mirror Writing*, 133.

Persian, Coptic, and Byzantine—was not an easy endeavor. But fashioning and refashioning hybrid forms and styles were Muslim artists' forte. Thus, in the premodern era, mirror writing's fixed structure and malleable context, content, and style served perfectly the purposes of Muslim patrons and calligraphers as they navigated new sociocultural and religiopolitical terrains. Ironically, in modern times, these very same features obscured mirror writing's multifaceted history, leading to muthanna's ultimate relegation to a monolithic and "pure" art form.

As custodians of this late antique visual idiom, Muslim calligraphers of muthanna disappointed neither their own contemporaries nor present-day viewers. Transitioning from unaltered letter forms and parataxis that defined mirror compositions between the seventh and tenth centuries to animated letters and multilayered designs in subsequent centuries, they transformed script into text-image, and put their rightful stamp on one of history's most remarkable artistic feats (fig. 15). To understand muthanna's tour de force in the visual and semantic realms, it is necessary to recognize both the debt that Muslims calligraphers owe to art history and their impressive contribution to it.

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